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ABSTRACT

Performance contracting, and some reservations thereto, are discussed as related to the present movement. The reservations are related to: (1) Accountability; (2) Individualized Teaching; (3) Extrinsic Rewards; (4) Testing; and (5) The Corruption of Both Language and the Process of Education. (DB)

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PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING: SOME RESERVATIONS

Edmund J. Farrell, NCTE

I speak to you this afternoon not as an assistant executive secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, for the Council has taken no official position on performance contracting; nor do I speak to you as one intimately acquainted with performance contracting as a consequence of his having participated as contractor, administrator, or teacher in negiotiating or attempting to meet the standards of a particular contract.

Rather, I speak as one who has followed in journal articles, news releases, and the speeches of others the movement from its inception, who has read the words of Leon Lessinger, heard Charles Blaschke in person, monitored from afar the flow of monies from the Office of Educational Opportunity. I know about the scandal in Texarkana, where Dorsett Educational Systems was accused of contaminating results by teaching to the tests, and about the disputed success of the Behavioral Research Laboratories in the Banneker Elementary School in Gary, Indiana, a school in which the state education code was violated for the first four months of the contract, during which time BRL taught reading and mathematics to the exclusion of all other subjects.

But beyond suggesting I have done my homework, I do not want, in the brief time I have, to discuss specific contracts, school districts, or learning corporations associated with performance contracting. Instead, I would like to share with you some of the deeply felt reservations I have about the language and the practices associated with the present movement, whether participated in by teachers who incorporate themselves, or by industries which exist outside the schools. Some of these reservations are more personal and less analytical than are others.

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First, on the matter of accountability: Contrary to the oft-repeated rationale for performance contracting, I do not hear the public loudly demanding that teachers or schools be held fiscally responsible for the success of their methods. I believe that the term accountability when used in reference to the schools is an invention of government and industry, neither of which, incidentally, holds itself sufficiently accountable for the present condition of our society.

I first heard the word accountability applied to the schools in 1967 in New Orleans at a conference sponsored by the USOE. The theme of the conference was "Educational Systems for the 70's," and as befitted such a theme, those of us in attendance were entertained with charts of the Polaris Missile Program and heady talk about PPBS and the "missions" of the schools. We were also introduced to the rhetoric of accountability by being served warning that taxpayers and parents--those androgynous and conveniently polymorphic groups from whose ranks teachers themselves seem forever exempt--would not tolerate for much longer the failure of the schools to achieve their missions, among which appeared to be that of making sure that every student scored average or better on all standardized examinations.

I find it curious that despite all the talk of accountability, the Gallup Poll last year found citizens strongly supportive of the Senate and House override of President Nixon's veto of the education budget. This year, in a survey of the public's attitude toward the schools, the Gallup Poll reported that only 8% of the parents held the teachers principally responsible for students' failure, and only 6% held the schools responsible. On the other hand, 54% thought students' home life to be the principal cause of failure. When juniors and

seniors in high schools were polled on this same issue, 51% believed the students themselves to be primarily responsible for their failure; 25% cited home life as the main cause; 11%, the teachers; and 5%, the schools (Phi Delta Kappan, September 1971). In short, parents and students appear to be more intuitively sophisticated about educational accountability than are performance contractors.

To determine adequately who or what is responsible for which aspects of student performance requires the most judicious uses of multiple-regression analysis, as Henry S. Dyer, vice-president, Educational Testing Service, and Stephen M. Barro, an economist with RAND Corporation, pointed out in the December 1970, Phi Delta Kappan. It requires, suggests Mr. Barro, analysis of such variables as the student's ethnicity, socioeconomic status, home, family, and neighborhood characteristics, age, intelligence, prior performance, etc. It requires analysis of classroom characteristics--class size, amount of instructional support, amount of materials, condition of physical facilities, etc. It requires careful analysis of the characteristics of the teacher and of the staff, as well as of the group characteristics of the pupils, i.e., the "peer-group influence" that may affect individual performance. Such analysis, which is time-consuming, expensive, and complex, exposes the simplism inherent in much of the current rhetoric of educational accountability and performance contracting.

I am well aware of the fiscal crisis of American education, of the accelerating tempo at which bond issues and proposed tax rates for the schools have been failing at the polls. But I do not attribute the so-called taxpayers' revolt to hostility toward the schools so much as I attribute it to hostility toward property taxes as the primary means of financing local education.

When this society was principally agrarian, taxes on property provided sufficient revenue for the needed services of the citizenry. But we are no

longer an agrarian society: we are a metropolitan society, an urbanized, transistorized, computerized society in which 70% of the population live on 2% of the land. For necessary services in such a society, taxation on property cannot generate sufficient revenue; the only viable taxation is that on income, a source mined by the Federal Government with mounting finesse.

In A Question of Priorities (Morrow, 1970), Edward Higbee informs us that as late as 1932, cities were receiving 50 cents of the tax dollar; the states, 20 cents; and the Federal Government, 30 cents. Despite the massive migration since 1932 into the cities and their surrounding terrain, a migration which has required an ever-greater increase in municipal services, the cities now receive 17 cents on the tax dollar; the states, 18 cents; and the Federal Government, 65 cents. Unable to govern the flow of federal tax revenues--no one has successfully voted us out of Viet Nam or out of areospace contracts--taxpayers have been conservatively regulating the flow of local property taxes, over which they still have some say.

To summarize, I believe that while people continue to be ideationally supportive of American education, they rightfully desire a greater share of its fiscal support to come from Federal monies.

Second, on the matter of individualized teaching: Those who have maintained that performance contracting has promoted greater individualization of instruction have, on the whole, spoken nonsense. Too often they have confused instruction which permits students to learn identical materials at different rates of speed with authentic individualized instruction, whereby each student has a curriculum tailored to his unique interests and abilities. Forcing all students, for example, through the Sullivan programed-reading materials, regardless of the varied rates at which they proceed, is more akin to brainwashing tactics than it is to the fostering of democratic pluralism in the classroom.

Third, on the matter of extrinsic rewards: When students involved in performance contracting are presented with such extrinsic rewards for learning as S and H green stamps, transistor radios, television sets, and pseudo-money with which to buy goods, they are being taught that education is not an enterprise sufficiently rewarding unto itself but rather a means to materialistic ends. I am well-acquainted, as you are, with the arguments in favor of extrinsic rewards, including the largely-unproved claim that eventually students will become less interested in the rewards as they internalize the joys of learning. I am not persuaded by the arguments, however, for they are too clearly Machiavellian or too blind to the present consequences of American capitalism and consumption. At a time when we need to be teaching students how to create a world in which they can cope adequately with far fewer goods, we should not be reinforcing a societal system which has led less than 6% of the world's population to consume 40 to 60% of the annual production of the earth's natural resources.

Fourth, on the matter of testing: When I review the literature (the word literature is used in strange and various ways) of performance contracting, I cannot find a reputable psychometrician or other specialist in educational measurements who will support at present the use either of pre-post standardized normative tests or of criterion-referenced tests to establish the success or failure of contractors in meeting their guarantees.

In an address to the American Educational Research Association, delivered in New York City on February 5, 1971, Roger T. Lennon, senior vice president, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and president, The Psychological Corporation, voiced serious doubts about both the validity and the reliability of present measuring instruments as used by performance contractors. After surveying the inherent weaknesses of gain-score achievement tests in determining an individual student's short-term progress in subjects such as mathematics and reading, Mr. Lennon concluded,

> ...maybe the cumulative impact of all the problems enumerated... is sufficient to lead us finally to speak the unspeakable: to declare that the grade equivalent, at whatever level, is an inappropriate unit for the measurement of gain of an individual pupil over relatively brief periods--say as much as a year of ordinary growth.

About the use of criterion-referenced tests as a way of circumventing the metric problems associated with norm-referenced tests, Mr. Lennon observed,

> Certainly, strong arguments can be advanced to support the proposition that criterion-referenced tests might be more valid measures of certain performance-contracted outcomes. But it is not yet altogether clear how results of a series of criterion-referenced tests can be translated into units that will yield measures of gain or growth.... The methodology for development of criterion-referenced tests is less well explicated than that for the development of norm-referenced tests, but it is clear... that the production of batteries of criterion-referenced tests equal in quality and scope to the better norm-referenced tests will be no mean accomplishment--and in the long run, I suspect, not less costly than the development of norm-referenced tests covering essentially the same domain of knowledge and skills.

After conceding that reasonably dependable estimates of average gains, as opposed to individual pupil gains, can be obtained at least in reading and arithmetic in present learning situations established through performance contracts, Mr. Lennon then proceeded to question the logic that would "permit a school system to ascribe even average gains unerringly to the contractor's performance or his special type of intervention."

For other discussions of the problems of measuring success and failure in performance contracting, I refer you to "Testing Hazards in Performance Contracting" by Robert E. Stake (Phi Delta Kappan, June 1971) as well as to the articles by Barro and Dyer cited earlier.

Fifth, on the corruption of both language and the process of education: I am one of those who came to teaching after having had as a youth

considerable experience in the world of business. Beyond having performed a number of menial tasks, such as picking prunes, bell hopping, stocking shelves in a grocery store and setting pins in a bowling alley, I also had sold clothing in the men's department at Montgomery Wards, had been the publicity director of a country fair, and had sold electrical supplies for my father, who managed an electrical wholesale company.

In good part, I entered teaching because I believed it to be one of the last refuges in the society where open communication might take place without either party--student or teacher--feeling a need to hold his hand on his wallet. True, I was paid by taxpayers, many of them parents of my students, for my endeavors. And while one might say I was trying to "sell" ideas and skills, not all of which, I might add, were "bought," the metaphors are quite loose: money just was not a factor influencing day-to-day relationships in the classroom. I could trust the students, and they could trust me, since neither of us was trying to mulct the other of cash.

I would like to believe that teachers have resisted as long as they have the awarding of merit pay, not because they are incapable of citing superior teachers, but because they have intuitively recognized that the process of education is contaminated when student performance is too closely tied to a teacher's income: even the most competent and humane teacher will view his students as means to his ends if his salary is contingent solely upon their short-term performance and attitudes. If the universe of possible modes of assessing the teacher's competency is reduced to the single criterion of student performance on standardized post tests, the teacher is unfairly tempted to preserve both his ego and his job by teaching to those examinations.

As teachers of English, we should appreciate better than do most persons the capacity of metaphor for influencing human behavior, its capability of shaping the way we perceive our world and its concomitant influence on our

attitudes toward what we perceive. In Language and Silence (Atheneum, 1967), George Steiner examines how the word vermin, by being used repeatedly in reference to the Jews, served the Nazis' success at genocide: Storm Troopers came to perceive those they put to death in ovens and gas chambers as a sub-human order of life, as an infestation in the society of two-legged lice needing to be exterminated.

It is too early to assess the consequences to our own society of the use of the word pigs as a metaphor for policemen, but I cannot help believing that the consequences will be deleterious, just as I cannot help believing that a woman is correct in asserting that a word like chick serves the ends of those who would treat her as less than a human being.

What I am leading to, of course, is what I regard as the present misuse in education of language that dehumanizes students and corrupts the processes by which they learn, metaphorical language that would lead teachers to perceive knowledge or experience as "inputs," performance on tests as "outputs," and graduates as "products" of school "plants." Once such metaphors, most of them from industry, become fully operative in education, the ethics of the marketplace become tenable in the classroom: students are seen as objects not meant to serve their own ends but those of the manipulator--the teacher or the contractor--and the open processes of communication, which must exist for schools to be truly educative, are dead-ended. If that unhappy time comes to all classrooms, my initial (and still valid) reason for entering teaching will no longer hold, and I will have no choice but to leave the profession.

But I do not really anticipate the arrival of that day, for I have found that humanists will not go gentle into such good nights. Rather, I foresee the time when American education and the society in which it exists will be held accountable for matters that really count. If by the year 2000 this

nation is still racist; if it is still unmindful of its poor; if it is still waging unpopular and undeclared wars in developing areas of the world; if it is still engaged in an armaments race, despite there now being in storage the equivalent of 200 lbs. of TNT for every pound of human flesh on earth; if it is still wantonly consuming the globe's resources and irresponsibly polluting land, water, and sky, then it, and education, and we shall surely have failed. And I promise you, history will hold us accountable.